BRITISH BATTLES

BY

HILAIRE BELLOC

628

TOURCOING

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TOURCOING

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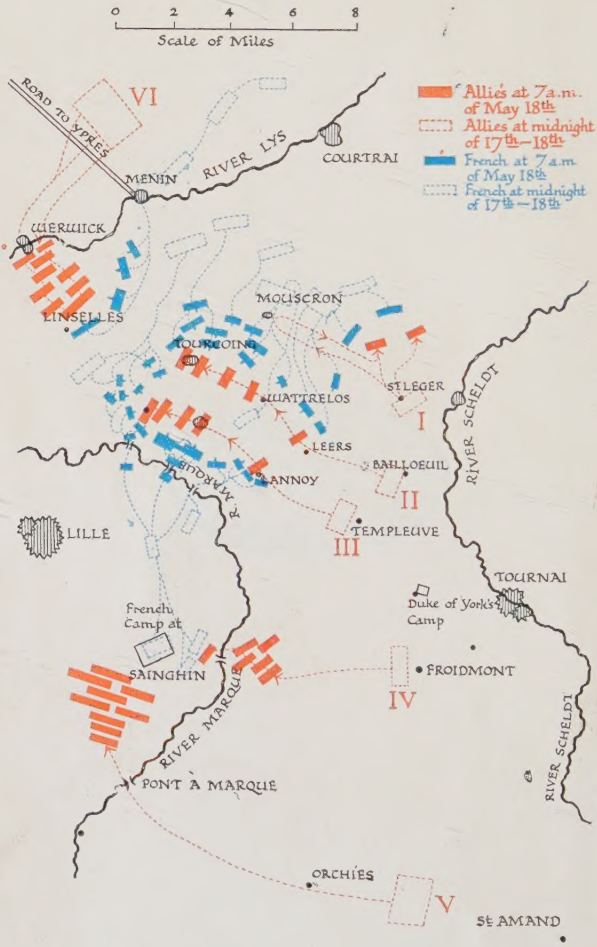
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Scale of Miles
Allies at 7 a.m. of May 18th
Allies at midnight of 17th–18th
French at 7 a.m. of May 18th
French at midnight of 17th–18th
ROAD TO YPRES
VI
MENIN
RIVER LYS
COURTRAI
WERWICK
LINSELLES
MOUSCRON
TOURCOING
WATTRELOS
ST LEGER
I
RIVER SCHELDT
LEERS
BAILLOEUIL
ANNOY
II
RIVER MARQUE
LILLE
TEMPLEUVE
III
TOURNAI
Duke of York's Camp
French Camp at
SAINGHIN
FROIDMONT
IV
RIVER MARQUE
RIVER SCHELDT
PONT A MARQUE
ORCHIES
V
ST AMAND

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TOURCOING

BY

HILAIRE BELLOC

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TOURCOING

PART I

THE POLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCE

The Battle of Tourcoing is one of those actions upon which European history in general is somewhat confused, and English history, in particular, ignorant.

That British troops formed part of those who suffered defeat, and that a British commander, the Duke of York, was the chief figure in the reverse, affords no explanation; for the almost exactly parallel case of Fontenoy—in which another royal duke, also the son of the reigning King of England, also very young, also an excellent general officer, and also in command was defeated—is among the most familiar of actions in this country. In both battles the posture of the British troops earned them as great and as deserved a fame as they had acquired

in victory; in both was work done by the Guards in particular, which called forth the admiration of the enemy. Yet Tourcoing remains unknown to the English general reader of history, while Fontenoy is one of the few stock names of battles which he can at once recall.

The reason that British historians neglect this action is not, then, as foreign and rival historians are too inclined to pretend, due to the fact that among the forces that suffered disaster were present certain British contingents.

Again, as will be seen in the sequel, the overwhelming of the Duke of York's forces at Tourcoing, by numbers so enormously superior to his own, was not due to any tactical fault of his, though it is possible that the faulty plan of the whole action may in some measure be ascribed to him.

Now Tourcoing is a battle which Englishmen should know, both for its importance in the military history of Europe, and for the not unworthy demeanour which the British troops, though defeated, maintained upon its field.

The true reason that Tourcoing is so little known in this country is to be discovered in that other historical fact attaching to the battle, which I have mentioned. It

occupied but a confused and an uncertain place in the general history of Europe; though perhaps, were its military significance fully understood, it would stand out in sharper relief. For though the Battle of Tourcoing was not the beginning of any great military series, nor the end of one; though no very striking immediate political consequence followed upon it, yet it was Tourcoing which made Fleurus possible, and it was Fleurus that opened the victorious advancing march of the French which, looked at as a whole, proceeded triumphantly thenceforward for nearly eighteen years and achieved the transformation of European society.

What, then, was the political circumstance under which this action was fought?

The French Revolution, by the novelty of its doctrines, by the fierceness and rapidity of its action, and by that military character in it which was instinctively divined upon the part of its opponents, challenged, shortly after its inception, the armed interference of those ancient traditional governments, external to and neighbouring upon French territory, which felt themselves threatened by the rapid advance of democracy.

With the steps that led from the first

peril of conflict to its actual outbreak, we are not concerned. That outbreak took place in April 1792, almost exactly three years after the meeting of the first Revolutionary Parliament in Versailles.

The first stages of the war (which was conducted by Austria and Prussia upon the one side, against the French forces upon the other) were singularly slow. No general action was engaged in until the month of September, and even then the struggle between the rival armies took the form not so much of a pitched battle as of an inconclusive cannonade known to history as that of VALMY. This inconclusive cannonade took place in the heart of French territory during the march of the invaders upon Paris. Disease, and the accident of weather, determined the retreat of the invaders immediately afterwards. In the autumn of the year, the French forces largely recruited by enthusiastic volunteer levies, but of low military value, poured over the country then called the Austrian Netherlands and now Belgium. But their success was shortlived. A mere efflux of numbers could not hold against the trained and increasing resistance of the Imperial soldiers. In the spring of 1793 the retreat began, and through the summer of that

year the military position of Revolutionary France grew graver and graver. Internal rebellions of the most serious character broke out over the whole territory of the Republic. In Normandy, in the great town of Lyons, in Marseilles, and particularly in the Western districts surrounding the mouth of the Loire, these rebellions had each in turn their moment of success, while the great naval station of Toulon opened its port to the enemy, and received the combined English and Spanish Fleets.

Coincidently with the enormous task of suppressing this widespread domestic rebellion, the Revolutionary Government was compelled to meet the now fully organised advance of its foreign enemies. It was at war no longer with Austria and Prussia alone, but with England, with Holland, with Spain as well, and the foreign powers not only thrust back the incursion which the French had made beyond their frontiers, but proceeded to attack and to capture, one after the other, that barrier of fortresses in the north-east which guarded the advance on Paris.

The succession of misfortune after misfortune befalling the French arms was checked, and the tide turned by the victory won at Wattignies in October 1793. After

that victory the immediate peril of a successful invasion, coupled with the capture of Paris, was dissipated. But it was yet uncertain for many months which way the tide would turn — whether the conflict would end in a sort of stale-mate by which the French should indeed be left independent for the moment, but the armed governments of Europe their enemies also left powerful to attack and in the end to ruin them; or whether (as was actually the case) the French should ultimately be able to take the offensive, to re-cross their frontiers, and to dictate to their foes a triumphant peace.

As I have said, the great action from which history must date the long series of French triumphs, bears the name of Fleurus; but before Fleurus there came that considerable success which made Fleurus possible, to which history gives the name of TOURCOING (from the town standing in the midst of the very large and uncertain area over which the struggle was maintained), and which provides the subject of these pages.

Fleurus was decided in June 1794. It was not a battle in which British troops were concerned, and therefore can form no part of this series. Tourcoing was decided in the preceding May, and though,

I repeat, it cannot be made the fixed and striking starting-point from which to date the long years of the French advantages, yet it was, as it were, the seed of those advantages, and it was Tourcoing, in its incomplete and complicated success, which made possible all that was to follow.

Tourcoing, then, must be regarded as an unexpected, not wholly conclusive, but none the less fundamental phase in the development of political forces which led to the establishment of the modern world. Its immediate result, though not decisive, was appreciable. To use a metaphor, it was felt in Paris, and to a less extent in London, Berlin, and in Vienna, that the door against which the French were desperately pushing, though not fully open, was thrust ajar. The defeat of a portion of the allied forces in this general action, the inefficacy of the rest, the heartening which it put into the French defence, and the moral effect of such trophies gained, and such a rout inflicted, were of capital import to the whole story of the war.

This is the political aspect in which we must regard the Battle of Tourcoing, but its chief interest by far lies in its purely military aspect; in the indiscretion which so nearly led the French forces to annihilation;

in the plan which was laid to surround and to destroy those forces by the convergence of the English, Prussian, and Austrian columns; in the way in which that plan came to nothing, and resulted only in a crushing disaster to one advanced portion of the forces so converging.

Tourcoing is rather a battle for military than for civilian historians, but those who find recreation in military problems upon their own account, apart from their political connection, will always discover the accidents of this engagement, its unexpected developments, and its final issue to be of surpassing interest.

PART II

THE GENERAL MILITARY SITUATION

In order to understand what happened at the Battle of Tourcoing, it is first necessary to have in mind the general situation of the forces which opposed each other round and about what is now the Franco-Belgian frontier, in the spring of 1794.

These forces were, of course, those of the French Republic upon the one hand, upon the other the coalition with its varied troops furnished by Austria, by Prussia, by England, and some few by sundry of the small States which formed part of the general alliance for the destruction of the new democracy.

The whole campaign of 1794 stands apart from that of 1793. The intervening winter was a period during which, if we disregard a number of small actions in which the French took the offensive, nothing of

moment was done upon either side, and we must begin our study with the preparations, originating in the month of February, for the active efforts which it was proposed to attempt when the spring should break.

In that month of February, Mack, recently promoted to the rank of Major-General in the Austrian army, met the Duke of York, the young soldier son of George III., in London, to concert the common plan. It was upon the 12th of that month that this meeting took place. Mack brought the news to the British Cabinet that the Emperor of Austria, his master, was prepared to act as Commander-in-Chief of the allied army in the coming campaign, proposed a general plan of advancing from the Belgian frontier upon Paris after the capture of the frontier fortresses, and negotiated for the largest possible British contingent.

Coburg, it was arranged, should be the General in practical command (under the nominal headship of the Emperor). Prussian troops, in excess of the twenty thousand which Prussia owed as a member of the Empire, were obtained upon the promise of a large subsidy from England and Holland, and with the month of April some 120,000 men were holding the line from Treves to

the sea. This passed through and occupied Dinant, Bavai, Valenciennes, St Amand, Denain, Tournai, Ypres, and Nieuport. To this number must be added men in the garrisons, perhaps some 40,000 more. Of this long line the strength lay in the centre.

The central army, under the general command of Coburg, who had his headquarters at Valenciennes, was, if we exclude men in garrisons, somewhat over 65,000 in strength, or more than half the whole strength of the long line. With Coburg in the central army was the Duke of York with some 22,000, and the Prince of Orange with a rather smaller contingent of Dutch.

Over against this long line with its heavy central "knot" or bulk of men under Coburg, in the neighbourhood of Valenciennes, the genius of Carnot had mustered over 200,000 French troops, which, when we have deducted various items for garrisons and other services, counted as effective more than 150,000 but less than 160,000 men. This French line extended from the sea to Maubeuge, passing through Dunquerque, Cassel, Lille, Cambrai, and Bouchain.

It was as a fact a little before the opening of April that the French began the cam-

SKETCH MAP SHOWING THE OPPOSING FRENCH AND ALLIED LINES. APRIL 1794

paign by taking the offensive on a large scale upon the 29th of March.

Pichegru, who was in command of that frontier army, attacked, with 30,000 men, the positions of the allies near Le Cateau, well to the right or south-east of their centre and his, and was beaten back.

It was upon the 14th of April that the Emperor of Austria joined Coburg at Valenciennes, held a review of his troops (including the British contingent, which will be given later in detail), fixed his headquarters in the French town of Le Cateau, and at once proceeded to the first operation of the campaign, which was the siege of the stronghold of Landrecies. The Dutch contingent of the allies drove in the French outposts and carried the main French position in front of the town within that week. By the 22nd of April the garrison of Landrecies was contained, the beleaguering troops had encircled it, and the siege was begun.

After certain actions (most of them partial, and one of peculiar brilliance in the history of the British cavalry), actions each of interest, and some upon a considerable scale, but serving only to confuse the reader if they were here detailed, Landrecies fell after eight days' siege, upon the 30th of

April. An advance of the Austrian centre, after this success, was naturally expected by the French.

That normal development of the campaign did not take place on account of a curious episode in the strategy of this moment to which I beg the reader to give a peculiar attention. It is necessary to grasp exactly the nature of that episode, for it determined all that was to follow.

While the fate of Landrecies still hung in the balance, and before the surrender of the town, Pichegru had, in another part of the long line, scored one of those successes which in any game or struggle are worse than losing a trick or suffering a defeat. It was one of those successes in which one gets the better of one's opponent in one chance part of the general contest, but so triumphs without a set plan, with no calculation upon what should follow upon the achievement, and therefore with every prospect of finding oneself in a worse posture after it than before.

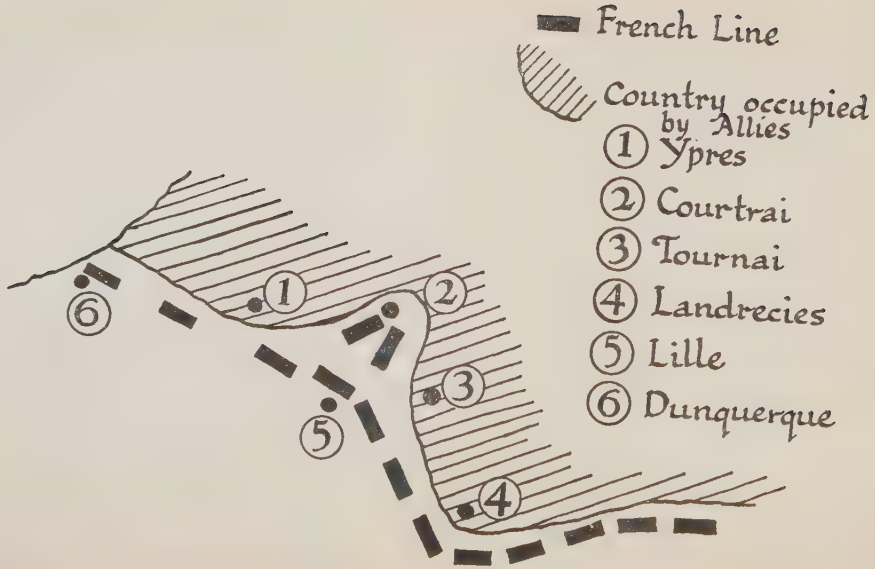
To take an analogy from chess: Pichegru's error, which I will presently describe, might be compared to the action of a player who, taking a castle of his opponent's with his queen, thereby leaves his king unguarded and open to check-mate.

Wherever men are opposed one to the other in lines, each line having the mission to advance against the other, it is a fatal move to get what footballers call "'fore side": to let a portion of your forces advance too far from the general line held by the whole, and to have the advanced part of that portion thus isolated from the support of its fellows. Such a formation invites a concentration of your opponents against the isolated body, and may lead to its destruction.

It was precisely in this position that Pichegru placed a portion of his forces by the ill-advised advance he made down the valley of the Lys to Courtrai.

Taking advantage of the way in which the main forces of the allies were tied to the siege of Landrecies, the French commander wisely moved forward the whole of his forces to the north and west, pushing the enemy back before him to the line Ypres-Menin, and besieging Menin itself. But most unwisely he not only permitted to advance, but himself directed and led, a body of 30,000 men (the command of General Souham) far forward of this general movement: he actually carried it on as far as the town of Courtrai.

The accompanying sketch map shows


French Line
Country occupied by Allies
1 Ypres
2 Courtrai
3 Tournai
4 Landrecies
5 Lille
6 Dunquerque

how much too far advanced this wedge of men (so large a contingent to imperil by isolation!) was beyond the general line, and, to repeat the phrase I have just used, a metaphor which best expresses my meaning, Souham and his division, by Pichegru's direct orders, had got "'fore side."

The only excuse that can be pleaded for Pichegru's folly in this matter, was the temptation presented by the weak garrison of Courtrai, and the bait which a facile temporary success always holds out for a man who has formed no consistent general plan. But that very excuse is the strongest condemnation of the inexcusable error, and this strategical fault of Pichegru's was soon paid for by the imperilling of all the great body of French troops within that rashly projected triangle.

For the moment Pichegru may have foolishly congratulated himself that he had done something of military value, as he had certainly done something striking. Menin fell to the French on the same day that Landrecies did to the Austrians, and this further success doubtless tempted him to remain with the head of his wedge at Courtrai, when every consideration of strategy should have prompted him to

retrace his steps and to recall the over-advanced division back into line.

This isolated position down the valley of the Lys, this wedge thrust out in front of Lille, positively asked the allies to attack it.

The enemy was a fortnight developing his plan, but his delay was equalled by Pichegru's determination to hold the advanced post he had captured; and when the allies did finally close in upon that advanced post, nothing but a series of accidents, which we shall follow in detail when we come to the story of the action, saved Souham from annihilation. And the destruction of Souham's division, considering its numbers and its central position, might have involved the whole French line in a general defeat.

As I have said, it was at the end of April that this false success of Pichegru's was achieved, and a whole fortnight was to elapse before the allies concentrated to take advantage of that error, and to cut off Souham's division.

That fortnight was full of minor actions, not a few of them interesting to the student of military history, and one again remarkable as a feat of English horse. I deliberately omit all mention of these lest I should confuse the reader and disturb

his conception of the great battle that was to follow.

That battle proceeded upon a certain plan thought out in detail, perfectly simple in character, and united in conception. It failed, as we shall see; and by its failure turned what should have been the cutting-off and destruction of Souham's command into a signal French victory. But before we can understand the causes of its failure, we must grasp the plan itself in its major lines, and with that object I shall discuss it in my next section under the title of "The Plan of the Allies."

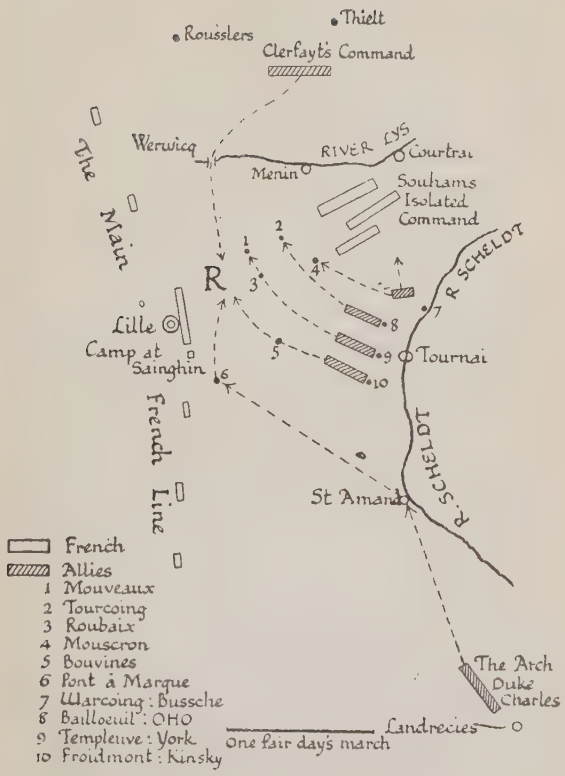
PART III

THE PLAN OF THE ALLIES

If the reader will look at the map opposite he will see in what disposition the armies of the allies were, at the end of April and the first days of May 1794, to carry into effect the plan which I proceed to describe.

There, in its triangle or advanced wedge, with a base stretching across Lille and an apex at Courtrai, lay the exposed French division, Souham's.

Clerfayt was to the north of that wedge. The French, in pushing their wedge up to Courtrai, had thus separated him from the rest of the allies. Clerfayt lay with his command round about the district of Roulers ; he attempted to return and oust Souham, but he failed, and to the north of the French wedge, and separated from the rest of the allies by its intervening thousands, he remained up to, throughout, and after the great battle that was to follow.


Thielt
Rousslers
Clerfayt's Command
The Main French Line
Werwicq
RIVER LYS
Courtrai
Menin
Souhams Isolated Command
R SCHELDT
R
Lille
Camp at Sainghin
Tournai
St Amand
R. SCHELDT
The Arch Duke Charles
French
Allies
1 Mouveaux
2 Tourcoing
3 Roubaix
4 Mouscron
5 Bouvines
6 Pont à Marque
7 Warcoing : Bussche
8 Baillocuil : OHO
9 Templeuve : York
10 Froidmont : Kinsky
Landrecies
One fair day's march

Right away down south, nearly sixty miles as the crow flies, lay the bulk of the Austrian army, Coburg's command, round the town which it had just captured, Landrecies. The Duke of York's command, detached from this main army of Coburg, had been ordered north, and was, by May 3rd, at Tournai. To the east lay the Prussian forces together with a small body of Hanoverians, about 4000 in number, which last could be brought up on to the Scheldt River when necessary.

It will thus be seen that the allies, at the moment when the plan was about to be formulated, lay on either side of the French wedge, and that any scheme for cutting off that wedge from the main French line must consist in causing a great force of the allies to appear rapidly and unexpectedly between Courtrai and Lille.

In order to do this, it was necessary to get Clerfayt to march down south to some point where he could cross the River Lys, while the rest of the allies were marching north from their southern positions to join hands with him.

When this larger mass of the allies coming up from the south and the east should have joined hands with Clerfayt, all the great French body lying advanced

in the valley of the Lys round Menin and Courtrai would be cut off.

Now the success of such a plan obviously depended upon two factors: synchrony and surprise. That is, its success depended upon the accurate keeping of a time-table, and upon carrying it out too quickly and unexpectedly for Souham to fall back in time.

Clerfayt's force coming down from the north, all the rest of the allies coming up from the east and the south must march with the common object of reaching "R," a fixed rendezvous, agreed upon beforehand, and of meeting there together at some appointed time. If any considerable body lagged behind the rest, if part of the great force marching up from the south, for instance, failed to keep in line with the general advance, or if Clerfayt bungled or delayed, the junction would be imperfect or might even not take place at all, and the number of men present to cut off the French when a partial and imperfect junction had been effected, might be too small to maintain itself astraddle of the French communications, and to prevent the great French force from breaking its way through back to Lille.

So much for synchrony: and as for sur-

prise, it is obvious that for the success of this plan it was necessary to work both rapidly and secretly.

Here was Souham with a body of men which recent reinforcement had raised to some 40,000, lying much too far ahead of the general French line and in peril of being cut off. Pichegru was foolish to maintain him in that advanced position, but, though that was an error, it was an error based upon a certain amount of calculation. Pichegru, and Souham under his orders, kept to their perilous position round Courtrai, because it did after all cut the allies in two, and because they knew that they could deal with Clerfayt's force upon the north (which was only half their own), while they also knew that the bulk of their enemies were tied down, far away to the south, by the operations round Landrecies.

If Souham at Courtrai got news in time of the march northward of that main southern force, he had only to fall back upon Lille to be saved.

It was not until the 10th of May that the plan was elaborated whereby it was hoped to annihilate Souham's command, and this plan seems to have occurred first to the Duke of York upon the evening of that day,

after a successful minor action between his troops and the French just outside Tournai.

The Duke of York had been at Tournai a week, having come up there from Landrecies after the fall of that fortress, though the mass of the Austrian forces still remained away in the south. The week had been spent in "feeling" the south-eastern front of the French advanced "wedge," and it was by the evening of the 10th that the Duke of York appears to have decided that the time was ripe for a general movement.

At any rate, it was upon the morrow, the 11th, that the English Prince sent word to Clerfayt that he intended to submit to the Emperor, who was the ultimate authority upon the side of the allies, a plan for the general and decisive action he desired to bring about. On the next day, the 12th, a Monday, the Duke of York wrote to Clerfayt that he hoped, "on the day after the morrow" (that is, upon the Wednesday, the 14th), "to take a decisive movement against the enemy." And we may presume that the Duke had communicated to the Emperor the nature of his plan. For on the 13th, the Tuesday, the Emperor was in possession of it, and his orders, sent out

upon that day, set out the plan in detail.[1] That plan was as follows :—

Clerfayt, with his force, which was rather less than 20,000 all told, was to march south from Thielt, his headquarters for the moment, and advance upon the little town of Wervicq upon the River Lys. Here there was a bridge, and Clerfayt was also in possession of pontoons wherewith to pass the stream. Meanwhile, the southern mass of the allies was to concentrate upon the Scheldt in the following manner :

The few thousand Hanoverians, under Bussche, were to take up their position at Warcoing, just upon and across that river. Two miles further south, Otto, with a larger Austrian force accompanied by certain English cavalry (the numbers will follow), was to concentrate at Bailleul.

The Duke of York's own large force, which had been at Tournai for over a week, was to go forward a little and concentrate at Templeuve. Five miles to the south of Templeuve, at Froidmont, a column, somewhat larger than the Duke of York's, under Kinsky, was to concentrate.

There were thus to be concentrated upon

[1] These dates are important in another aspect of the matter—the authorship of the plan. I will, therefore, return to them in more detail at the close of this section.

the south of the French wedge four separate bodies under orders to advance northward together.

The first, under Bussche, was only about 4000 strong, the Hanoverians and Prussians; the second, under Otto, from about 10,000 strong; the third, under the Duke of York, of much the same strength, or a little less; and the fourth, under Kinsky, some 11,000.

These four numbered nearly, or quite, 35,000 men, less than the "nearly 40,000" at which certain French historians have estimated their strength.

To these four columns (which I will beg the reader to remember by their numbers of first, second, third, and fourth, as well as by the names of their commanders, Bussche, Otto, York, and Kinsky) a fifth must be added, the appreciation of whose movements and failure is the whole explanation of the coming battle.

The fifth column was a body of no less than 16,000 men coming from the main Austrian body far south, and ordered to be at St Amand upon the Scheldt somewhat before the concentration of the other four columns, and to advance from St Amand to Pont-à-Marcq. Upon reaching Pont-à-Marcq this fifth column would be in line with the other four at Warcoing, Bailleul,

Templeuve, and Froidmont, and ready to take its part in the great forward movement towards the north.

In order to appreciate the way in which the issue was bound to depend upon this fifth column, I must now detail the orders given to all six, the five columns in the valley of the Scheldt, and the sixth body, under Clerfayt, north of the Lys ; for it is these orders which constitute the soul of the plan.

Bussche, with his small body of 4000 Hanoverians, the first column, had the task of " holding " the apex of the French wedge when the attack should begin. That is, it was his task to do no more with his inferior forces than send one portion up the road towards Courtrai, so that the advanced French troops there should be engaged while another part of his small command should attack the little town of Mouscron, which the French held, of course, for it was within their wedge of occupation. It was obviously not hoped that this little body could do more than keep the French occupied, prevent their falling back towards Lille, and perhaps make them believe that the main attack was coming from Bussche's men.

The second column, under Otto, was to

advance upon Tourcoing, in those days a little town, now a great manufacturing city.

The third column, that under the Duke of York, was to march side by side with Otto's column, and to make for Mouveaux, a village upon a level with Tourcoing upon this line of advance, and to be reached by marching through Roubaix (now also a great manufacturing town, but then a small place).

None of these advances, Bussche's, Otto's, or York's, was of any considerable length. The longest march through which any of these three columns had to fight its way was that of the Duke of York from Templeuve to Mouveaux, and even this was not eight miles.

The fourth column, under Kinsky, had a harder task and a longer march. It was to carry Bouvines, which was in the hands of the French and nearly seven miles from Froidmont (Kinsky's point of departure), and when it had done this it was to turn to the north with one part of its force in order to shelter the march of the Duke of York from attacks by the French troops near Lille, while another part of its force was to join with the fifth column and march up with it until both came upon a level

with York and Otto in the neighbourhood of Tourcoing and Mouveaux.

Now it was to this fifth column, the 16,000 men or more under the Arch-Duke Charles, that the great work of the day was assigned. From Pont-à-Marcq they must attack a great French body quite equal to their own in numbers, even when part of Kinsky's force had joined them, which French force lay in the camp at Sainghin. They must thrust this force back towards Lille, pour up northward, and arrive in support of Otto and York by the time these two commanders were respectively at Tourcoing and Mouveaux.

In other words, the fifth column, that of the Arch-Duke Charles, was asked to make an advance of nearly fourteen miles, involving heavy fighting in its first part, and yet to synchronise with columns who had to advance no more than five miles or seven.

Supposing all went well, Clerfayt—crossing the Lys at Wervicq at the same hour which saw the departure of the five southern columns from Warcoing, Bailleul, Templeuve, Froidmont, and Pont-à-Marcq respectively, was to advance southward from the river towards Mouveaux and Tourcoing, a distance of some seven miles, while the

others were advancing on the same points from the south.

If the time-table were accurately kept and this great combined movement all fitted in, Clerfayt would join hands with the second, third, fourth, and fifth columns somewhere in the neighbourhood of Tourcoing and Mouveaux, a great force of over 60,000 men would lie between the French troops at Lille and Souham's 40,000 in the "advanced wedge," and those 40,000 thus isolated were, in a military sense, destroyed.

Such being the mechanism or map of the scheme, we must next inquire the exact dates and hours upon which the working of the whole was planned.

The Duke of York, as we have seen when he was arranging the business and writing to Clerfayt and the Emperor, had talked of moving upon the 14th, by which presumably he meant organising the attack on the 14th, and setting the first columns in motion from their places of rendezvous in the early hours of that day, Wednesday, before dawn.

If that was in his mind, it shows him to have been a prompt and energetic man, and to have had a full appreciation of the place which surprise occupied in the chances of success. If, indeed, the Emperor got the

Duke of York's message in time on the 12th, if he had at once accepted the plan, and had with Napoleonic rapidity ordered the bulk of his forces (which were still right away south and east) to move, he might have had them by forced marches upon and across the Scheldt, and ready to execute the plan by the 14th, or at any rate by the morning of the 15th.

But from what we know of the family to which the Duke of York belonged, it is exceedingly improbable that this younger son of George III. had, on this one occasion only, any lightning in his brain ; and even if he did appreciate more or less the importance of rapid action, the Emperor did not appreciate it. He committed the two contradictory faults of delaying the movement and of asking too much marching of his men, and it was not until the morning of the Wednesday, May the 14th, that the bulk of the Austrian army, which still lay in the Valenciennes and Landrecies district, broke up for its northward march, to arrive at the rendezvous beyond the Scheldt, and to carry out the plan.[1]

[1] I pay no attention to the ridiculous suggestion that the delay was due to the contemporary peril in Poland, and to Thugut's anxiety to have Austrian troops in the east rather than on the western frontier. People who write modern history thus seem to forget that the

It was not until Thursday the 15th of May that the Emperor joined the Duke of York at Tournai, and very late upon the same day the Arch-Duke Charles had brought up the main body of the Austrian forces from the south to the town of St Amand.

We shall see later what a grievous error it was to demand so violent an effort from the men of the Arch-Duke Charles' command. From Landrecies itself to St Amand is 30 miles as the crow flies; and though, of course, the mass of the troops which the Arch-Duke Charles had been thus commanded to bring up northward in such haste were most of them well on the right side of Landrecies when the order to

electric telegraph did not exist in the eighteenth century. The more reasonable pretension that the Austrians hesitated between marching north to effect the plan against Souham, and marching east to relieve the pressure upon Kaunitz, who was hard pressed upon the Sambre, deserves consideration. But Kaunitz's despatch, telling how he had been forced to fall back, did not reach headquarters until the 12th, and if immediate orders had been given for the northern march, that march would have begun before the news of Kaunitz's reverse had arrived. The only reasonable explanation in this as in most problems in human history, is the psychological one. You have to explain the delay of George III.'s son, and Joseph II.'s nephew. To anyone not obsessed by the superstition of rank, the mere portraits of these eminent soldiers would be enough to explain it.

advance reached them, yet the average march undertaken by his men in little more than twenty-four hours was a full twenty miles, and some of his units must have covered nearer thirty. I will not delay further on this point here; its full importance will appear when we come to talk of the action itself.

The Arch-Duke Charles being only as far as St Amand on the evening of Thursday the 15th, and his rendezvous, that of the fifth column in the great plan, being Pont-à-Marcq, a further good sixteen miles north-westward, it was evident that the inception of that plan and the simultaneous advance of all the five columns from their five starting-points of Warcoing, Bailleul, Templeuve, Froidmont, and Pont-à-Marcq, could not begin even upon the 16th. It would take the best part of a day to bring the Arch-Duke Charles up to Pont-à-Marcq; his men were in imperative need of rest during a full night at St Amand, and it is probable, though I have no proof of it, that he had not even fully concentrated there by the evening of the 15th, and that his last units only joined him during the forenoon of the 16th.

The whole of that day, therefore, the 16th, was consumed so far as the first, second,

third, and fourth columns were concerned, in merely gathering and marshalling their forces, and occupying, before nightfall, the points from which they were to depart simultaneously in the combined advance of the morrow. They *had* to wait thus for the dawn of the 17th, because they had to allow time for the fifth column to come up.

The time-table imposed upon the great plan by these delays is now apparent. The moment when all the strings of the net were to be pulled together round Souham was the space between midnight and dawn of Saturday the 17th of May. And the hour when all the six bodies of the allies were to join hands at "R" near Tourcoing was the noon of that day.

Before day broke upon the 17th, Clerfayt was to find himself at Wervicq upon the River Lys and across that stream, while of the five southern columns the Arch-Duke Charles was to be attacking the French troops just in front of Pont-à-Marcq with the fifth column at the same moment; Kinsky, with the fourth, was to be well on the way from Froidmont to Bouvines where he was to attack the French also and cross the bridge; the Duke of York, with the third, was to be well on the way from Tem-

pleuve to Lannoy; Otto, with the second, was to be equally advanced upon his line, somewhere by Wattrelos in his march upon Tourcoing; while Bussche, with his small first column, on the extreme north, was to be getting into contact with the French posts south of Courtrai, which it was his duty to "hold," impressing upon Souham the idea that a main attack might develop in that quarter, and so deluding the French into maintaining their perilously advanced stations until they were cut off from Lille by the rest of the allies.

The morning would be filled by the advance of Clerfayt from Wervicq southward upon Mouveaux and Tourcoing, while the corresponding fighting advance northward upon Mouveaux and Tourcoing also, of Otto, York, Kinsky, and the Arch-Duke Charles, should result somewhere about noon in their joining hands with Clerfayt and forming one great body: a body cutting off Courtrai from Lille, and the 40,000 under Souham from their fellows in the main French line.

With such a time-table properly observed, the plan should have succeeded, and between the noon and the evening of that Saturday, the great force which Souham

commanded should have been at the mercy of the allies.

Such was the plan and such the time-table upon which it was schemed. Its success depended, of course, as I have said, upon an exact keeping of that time-table, and also upon the net being drawn round Souham before he had guessed what was happening. The second of these conditions, we shall see when we come to speak of "The Preliminaries of the Action," was successfully accomplished. The first was not; and its failure is the story of the defeat suffered by the Duke of York in particular, and the consequent break-down of the whole strategical conception of the allies.

But before dealing with this it is necessary to establish a disputed point.

I have spoken throughout of the plan as the Duke of York's. Because it failed, and because the Duke of York was an English prince, historians in this country have not only rejected this conclusion, but, as a rule, have not even mentioned it. The plan has been represented as Mack's plan, as a

typical example of Austrian pedantry and folly, the Duke of York as the victim of foolish foreigners who did not know their business, and it has even been hinted that the Austrians desired defeat! With the latter extravagant and even comic suggestion I will deal later in this study; for the moment I am only concerned with the responsibility of the Duke of York.

It must, in the first place, be clearly understood that the failure of the plan does not reflect upon the judgment of that commander. It failed because Clerfayt was not up to time, and because too much had been asked of the fifth column. The Duke came of a family not famous for genius; he was exceedingly young, and whatever part he may have had in the framing of this large conception ought surely to stand to his credit.

It is true that Mack, the Austrian General, drafted details of the plan immediately before it was carried into execution, and our principal military historian in this country tells us how "on the 16th, Mack prepared an elaborate plan which he designed."[1]

Well, the 16th was the Friday.

Now we know that on the 11th of May,

[1] Fortescue, vol. iv., part i., p. 255.

the Sunday, the Emperor and his staff had no intention of making a combined attack to cut off Souham from Lille, for orders were given to Clerfayt on that day to engage Souham along the valley of the Lys for the purpose of holding the attention of the French, and in the hope of recovering Menin—the exact opposite of what would have been ordered if a secret and unexpected attempt to cut off Souham by crossing further up the river had been intended. It was at the same moment that the Duke of York was sending word to Clerfayt on his own account, to the effect that he intended to submit a plan to the Emperor, and it is worth noting that in the very order which was sent to Clerfayt by the Emperor he was told to refer to the Duke of York as to his future movements.

The archives of the Ministry of War at Vienna have it on record that the Duke of York made a definite statement of a plan to Clerfayt, which plan he intended to submit to the Emperor immediately, and a letter dated upon the Monday, the 12th—four days before there is any talk of Mack's arranging details,—York writes to Clerfayt telling him that he hopes to make his decisive movement against the enemy on the Wednesday, the 14th.

On the 13th, Tuesday, the orders of the Emperor to both Clerfayt and the Duke of York (which are also on record) set down this plan in detail, mentioning the point Wervicq at which Clerfayt was expected to cross the river Lys, and at the same time directing the Duke of York to march northward with the object of joining Clerfayt, and thus cutting off the French forces massed round Courtrai from their base. Further, in this same despatch, the initiative is particularly left to the Duke of York, and it is once more from him that Clerfayt is to await decisions as to the moment and details of the operation.

The same archives record the Duke of York sending Lieut.-Colonel Calvert to Clerfayt upon the 14th, to tell him that he meant to attack upon the morrow, the 15th, and they further inform us that it was on the English Prince's learning how scattered were Clerfayt's units, and how long it would therefore take him to concentrate, that action was delayed by some thirty-six hours.

Evidence of this sort is absolutely conclusive. The plan was not Mack's; it was York's.

PART IV

THE PRELIMINARIES OF THE BATTLE

Tourcoing is an action the preliminaries of which are easy to describe, and need occupy little of our space, because it was a battle in which the plan of one side was developed and prosecuted almost to its conclusion without a corresponding plan upon the other side.

As a rule, the preliminaries of a battle consist in the dispositions taken by each side for hours or for days—sometimes for weeks—beforehand, in order to be in a posture to receive or to attack the other side. These preliminaries include manœuvring for position, and sometimes in the fighting of minor subsidiary actions before the main action takes place.

Now, in the case of Tourcoing, there was none of this, for the French at Tourcoing were surprised.

The surprise was not complete, but it

was sufficiently thorough to make the whole of the fighting during the first day, Saturday (at least, the whole of the fighting in the centre of the field), a triumph for the allied advance.

Let us first appreciate exactly how matters looked to Souham when, on the 15th, the Thursday, the blow was about to fall upon him.

He had under his orders, with headquarters now at Courtrai, now at Menin (see sketch map on p. 58), rather less than 40,000. In that dash upon Courtrai a fortnight before, which had led to the dangerous establishment of so large an advanced body in front of the main French line, one main effect of that advance had been to push back, away to the left beyond the Lys, more than 16,000, but less than 20,000 men under the Austrian General, Clerfayt. With that army, Clerfayt's body, Souham had remained continually in touch. Detachments of it were continually returning to the valley of the Lys to harass his posts, and, in a word, Clerfayt's was the only force of the enemy which Souham thought he had need to bear in mind.

The bulk of the Austrian army he knew to be quite four days' march away to the south, at first occupied in the siege of

Landrecies, and later stationed in the vicinity of that fortress.

Of course, lying in his exposed position, Souham knew that a general attack upon him from the south was one of the possibilities of the situation, but it was not a thing which he thought could come unexpectedly: at any rate he thought himself prepared, by the use of his scouts and his spies, to hear of any such advance in ample time.

In case he should be attacked, the attack might take one of many forms. It might try to drive him over the Lys, where Clerfayt would be ready to meet him; or it might be a general attack upon Courtrai as a centre; or it might be (what had, as we have seen, been actually determined) an attempt to cut him and all his 40,000 off from the main French line.

This main French line ran through the town of Lille, and Lille not only had its garrison, but also at Sainghin, outside the fortifications to the south-east, a camp, under Bonnaud, of 20,000 men. If the attack from the south or from the north, or from both, managed to cut Souham off from Bonnaud's camp, and from the garrison at Lille, he was ruined, and his 40,000 were lost; but he hoped to be kept sufficiently

informed of the enemy's movements to fall back in time, should such an attempt be made, and to provide for it by effecting a junction with Bonnaud before it was delivered.

Pichegru, the Commander of the whole French army of the north, who had ordered the advance on Courtrai, happened to be absent upon a visit to the posts away south upon the Sambre River. Souham was therefore temporarily in full command of all the troops which were to be concerned in the coming battle. But the position was only a temporary one, and that must account for the deference he paid to the advice of the four generals subordinate to him, and for the council which he called at Menin on the critical Saturday night which decided the issue. He himself quotes his commission in the following terms :—"Commander-in-Chief of all the troops from the camp at Sainghin to Courtrai inclusive."

From the beginning of the week, when a detachment of his troops had but just recovered from a sharp action with the Duke of York's men towards Tournai, Souham appreciated that the forces of the enemy were gradually increasing to the south of him, and that the posts upon the

Scheldt were receiving additional enforcements of men. But neither his judgment nor the reports that came in to him led him to believe that the mass of the Austrian army was coming north to attack him. And in this he was right, for, as we have seen, the Emperor did not make up his mind until Wednesday the 14th, which was the day when orders were sent to the Arch-Duke Charles to march northward.

Souham's attitude of mind up to, say, the Thursday may be fairly described in some such terms as follows :—

"I know that a concentration is going on in the valley of the Scheldt to the south and east of me ; it is pretty big, but not yet exactly dangerous, though I shouldn't wonder if I were attacked in a few days from that quarter. What I am much more certain of is that active and mobile force which I beat off the other day, but which is still intact under the best General opposed to me, Clerfayt. I hear that it is marching south again, and my best troops and my offensive must be directed against that. I am far superior in numbers to Clerfayt, and if I can bring him to an action and break him, I can then turn to the others at my leisure : for the moment I have only one front to think of—that on the north."

But the negligence which he or his informants were guilty of—a negligence that was to prove so nearly fatal to all those 40,000 French troops—consisted in the failure to discover what was up upon Friday the 16th.

During those twenty-four hours the Arch-Duke Charles had brought up his column to St Amand; the other four columns upon the Scheldt were concentrated, and upon the north of the Lys, Clerfayt had got orders to move upon Wervicq, and was, during the middle hours of Friday, actually upon the march. Yet, during all that day, Friday the 16th, Souham remained ignorant of the extremity of his peril.

The orders which he dictated upon the Friday night, and largely repeated upon the following morning of Saturday the 17th of May, show how little he expected the general action that was upon him. He arranged, indeed, for a cordon of troops to be watching, in insufficient numbers, the side towards the Scheldt, and he sent to Bonnaud and the camp at Sainghin, outside Lille, orders to keep more or less in touch with that cordon. The instructions to this cordon of troops along the eastern side of the French position is no more than one of general vigilance. It is still to Clerfayt

and towards the north alone that he directs an offensive and vigorous movement.

In a word, he was a good twenty-four hours behind with his information. He was wasting troops north of the Lys in looking for Clerfayt at a time when that General was already on the march to Wervicq, and he was leaving a scattered line of insufficient bodies to meet what he did not in the least expect, the rapid advance of Bussche, Otto, and York during that Saturday upon Mouscron, Tourcoing, and Roubaix.

Therefore it was that although Bussche's insufficient force was driven out of Mouscron at last by superior numbers, Otto and York succeeded in sweeping all the resistance before them, and, in the course of that Saturday, reached the first Tourcoing, the second Roubaix, and even Mouveaux.

The whole problem of warfare consists in a comparison between the information that each side has of the movements of the other. The whole art of success in war pivots upon the using of your enemy's ignorance. Had the allies upon this occasion been more accurate in keeping to their time-table, and somewhat more rapid in their movements, they would have caught the French commander still under the illu-

sion that there was no danger, save from the north, and would have succeeded in cutting off and destroying the main French force by getting in all together between Courtrai and Lille. For at that same moment, the early hours before daybreak of the 17th, the allies had begun their movement.

PART V

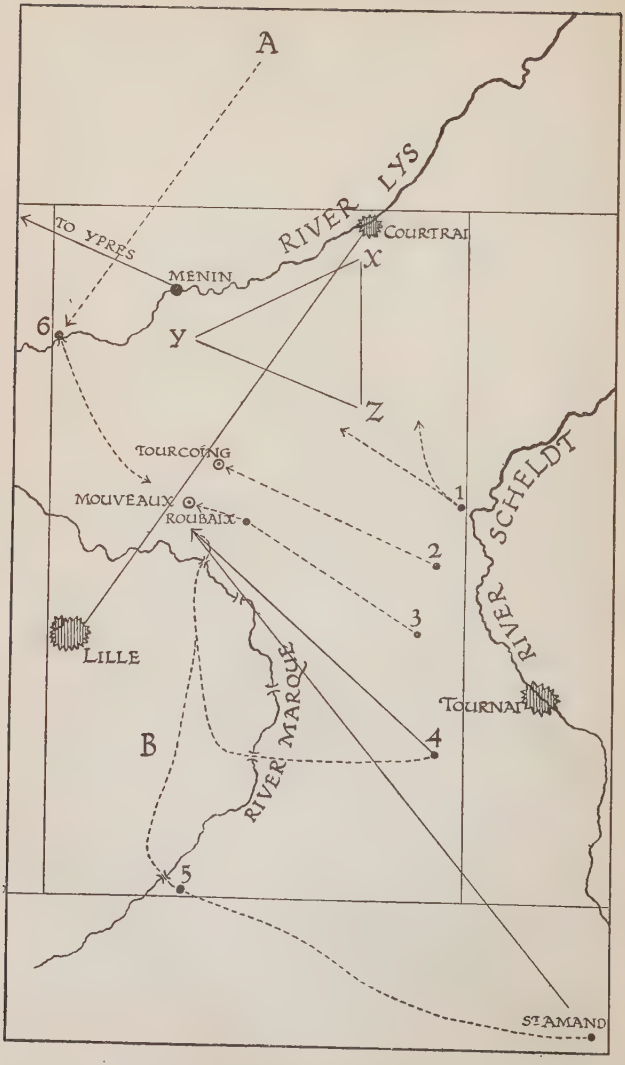
THE TERRAIN

The terrain over which the plan of the allies was to be tested must next be grasped if we are to understand the causes which led to its ultimate failure.

That terrain is most conveniently described as an oblong standing up lengthways north and south, and corresponding to the sketch map overleaf. That oblong has a base of twenty miles from east to west, a length from north to south of thirty-five.

These dimensions are sufficient to show upon what a scale the great plan of the allies for cutting off Souham at Courtrai was designed.

At its south-eastern corner the reader will perceive the town of St Amand, the furthest point south from which the combined movements of the allies began; while somewhat to the left of its top or northern edge, at the point marked "A," the northern-


A
RIVER LYS
TO YPRES
COURTRAI
MENIN
X
Y
Z
6
TOURCOING
MOUVEAUX
ROUBAIX
1
2
3
4
5
SCHELDT
RIVER
LILLE
B
RIVER MARQUE
TOURNAI
ST. AMAND

most body connected with that plan, the body commanded by Clerfayt, was posted at the origin of the movement.

The object of the whole convergence from the Scheldt on one hand, and from Clerfayt's northern position upon the other, being to cut off the French forces which lay at and south of Courtrai from Lille, and the main line of the French army, it is evident that the actual fighting and the chances of success or disaster would take place within a smaller interior oblong, which I have also marked upon the sketch map. This smaller or interior oblong measures about sixteen miles at its base by about twenty-five miles in length, and includes all the significant points of the action.

The points marked 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 respectively are the points at which the five columns advancing from the Scheldt valley northward were to find themselves before dawn on the morning of Saturday the 17th of May. We are already acquainted with them. They are Warcoing, Bailleul, Templeuve, Froidmont, and Pont-à-Marcq respectively; while the point marked 6 is Wervicq, from which Clerfayt was to start simultaneously with the five southern columns with the object of meeting his fellows round Tourcoing.

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The town of Courtrai will be perceived to lie in the north-eastern angle of this inner oblong, the town of Lille rather below the middle of its western side. In all the country round Courtrai, and especially to the south of it, within the triangle X Y Z, lay the mass of Souham's command of 40,000 men. There were many posts, of course, scattered outside that triangle, and connecting Courtrai with Lille; but the links were weak, and the main force was where I have indicated it to be.

A large body of French troops being encamped just under the walls of Lille at B (by which letter I mark Sainghin camp), and that fortress also possessing a garrison, the plan of cutting both these off from the 40,000 French that lay in the country near Courtrai involved getting the main part of the allies up from these points of departure on the south, and Clerfayt's body down from its point of departure on the north to meet upon the line drawn between Lille and Courtrai. Upon this line (which also roughly corresponds to the only main road between the two cities) may be perceived, lying nearer Lille than the centre of such line, the small town of Tourcoing and the village of Mouveaux. It was upon these two points that four of the

five southern columns were to converge northward, the second and third column reaching them first, the fourth and fifth marching up from the left in aid; and it was also, of course, upon these two points that Clerfayt was to march southward from the post at Wervicq, that had been given *him* as *his* point of departure before dawn upon that Saturday morning. If everything went perfectly, the great mass of the allied army should have found itself, by noon of Saturday the 17th, as I have said, astraddle of the Lille-Courtrai road, and effectively cutting off the French troops to the north.

What was the nature of the wide countryside over which these various movements were to take place?

It was part of that great plain of Flanders which stretches from the River Scheldt almost unbroken to the Straits of Dover and the North Sea. In the whole of the great oblong represented by my sketch map there is hardly a point 150 feet above the water level of the main river valleys, while the great mass of that territory is diversified by no more than very broad and very shallow rolls of land, the crests of which are sometimes and exceptionally as much as fifty feet above the troughs, but the greater

part thirty, twenty, or even less. Here and there an isolated hummock shows upon the landscape, but the general impression of one who walks across from the valley of the Lys to that of the Scheldt is of a flat, monotonous land in which one retains no memory of ascent or descent, and in which the eye but rarely perceives, and that only from specially chosen points, any wide horizon.

To-day the greater part of this country suffers from the curse of industrialism and repeats—of course, with far less degradation—the terrible aspect of our own manufacturing towns. Roubaix and Tourcoing in particular are huge straggling agglomerations of cotton-spinners and their hands. A mass of railways and tramways cut the countryside, and the evil presence of coal-smoke mars it everywhere: at least within the region of Lille, Tourcoing, and Roubaix.

In May 1794, though a considerable industry had begun to grow up in Lille itself, the wide, open countryside round the town was entirely agricultural. Much of it was what soldiers call "blind" country: that is, it was cut up into fields with numerous hedges; there were long farm walls and a great number of small watercourses

fringed with trees. But, on the other hand, there was very little wood. Moreover, though there were few places from which one could overlook any considerable view, the "blindness" of the field, as a whole, has been much exaggerated in the attempt to excuse or explain the disaster of which it was the theatre. The southern part of it is open enough, and so is the north-eastern portion, in which the first column operated. Of the soil no particular mention is needed; most of the great roads were paved; the weather had created no difficulty in the going, and the only trouble in this respect lay in the northern part, where Clerfayt's command was condemned to advance over patches of loose and difficult sand, which made the road, or rather rare lanes, very heavy.

It will at once be perceived that, in view of the operations planned, one principal obstacle exists in the terrain, the River Lys. Few bridges crossed this stream, and for the purpose of turning the French position and coming across the Lys from the north to the neighbourhood of Mouveaux, there was in those days no bridge save the bridge at Wervicq (at the point marked 6 on the plan at the beginning of this section); but this difficulty we have seen to be lessened

by the presence in Clerfayt's command of a section of pontoons.

At first sight one might perceive no other considerable obstacle save the Lys to the general movement of the allied army. But when the peculiar course of the little River Marque is pointed out, and the nature of its stream described, the reader will perceive that it exercised some little effect upon the fortunes of the battle, and might have exercised a much greater one to the advantage of the British troops had not the Duke of York blundered in a fashion which will be later described.

In the first place, it should be noted that this little stream (it is no wider than a canal, will barely allow two barges to pass in its lower course, and will not float one to the southward of Lille) turns up quite close to Roubaix, and at the nearest point is not a mile from the market-place of that town.

Now the significance of such a conformation to the battlefield of Tourcoing lay in the fact that it was impossible for any considerable force to manœuvre between the third column (which was marching upon Roubaix) and the Marque River. Had the Marque not existed, Kinsky, with the fourth column, would have been free to

march parallel with York, just as York marched parallel with Otto, while the Arch-Duke with his fifth column, instead of having been given a rendezvous right down south at Pont-à-Marcq (the point marked 5 on my sketch), would have gone up the main road from St Amand to Lille, and have marched parallel with Kinsky, just as Kinsky would have marched parallel with York. In other words, the fourth and the fifth columns, instead of being ordered along the dotted lines marked upon my sketch (the elbows in which lines correspond to the crossing places of the Marque), would have proceeded along the uninterrupted arrow lines which I have put by the side of them.

The Marque made all the difference. It compelled the fifth column to take its roundabout road, and the fourth, detained by the delay of the fifth, was held, as we shall see in what follows, for a whole day at one of the crossings of the river.

The little stream has a deep and muddy bottom, and the fields upon its banks are occasionally marshy. This feature has been exaggerated, as have the other features I have mentioned, in order to explain or excuse the defeat, but, at any rate, it prevented the use of crossing places other than bridges. The Marque has no true

fords, and there is no taking an army across it, narrow as it is, save by the few bridges which then existed. These bridges I have marked upon the sketch.

So far as the terrain is concerned, then, what we have to consider is country, flat, but containing low defensive positions, largely cut up, especially between the Scheldt and Roubaix, by hedges and walls, though more open elsewhere, and particularly open towards the north: a serious obstacle to the advance of one body in the shape of the River Lys; and another obstacle, irritating rather than formidable in character, but sufficient both by its course and its marshy soil to complicate the advance, namely, the little River Marque.

As to the weather, it was misty but fine. The nights in bivouac were passed without too much discomfort, and the only physical condition which oppressed portions of the allied army consisted in the error of its commanders, and proceeded from fatigue.

PART VI

THE ACTION

At about ten o'clock in the morning of Friday the 16th of May, Clerfayt, in his positions right up north beyond the Lys—positions which lay at and in front of the town of Thielt, with outposts well to the south and west of that town,—received the orders of the Emperor.

These orders were what we know them to be: he was to march southward and westward and strike the Lys at Wervicq. He was to arrive at that point at or before nightfall, for in the very first hours of the morrow, Saturday, and coincidently with the beginning of the advance of the five columns from their southern posts, he was to cross the Lys and to proceed to join hands with those columns in the following forenoon, when the heads of them would have reached the neighbourhood of Tourcoing and Mouveaux.

Bussche, with the first column, his 4000

Hanoverians, had no task during that day but to proceed the mile and a half which separated Warcoing from the little village of St Leger, and, with the head of his column in that village, prepare to pass the night and be ready to march forward long before dawn the next day.

Field-Marshal Otto, with the second column, was similarly and leisurely occupied marshalling his 10,000 Austrians and his contingent of British cavalry, so that the head of his column was at Bailleul ready also to advance with the early, dark, small hours of the ensuing morning.

The Duke of York, with his third column of similar numbers, or somewhat less, was performing a precisely similar task, and ordering his men so that the head of that column should reach Templeuve by evening and be ready to march at the same moment as the others did, shortly after midnight.

All these three, then, were absolutely ready, fresh from fatigue and in good order, upon that Friday evening at their appointed posts.

It is here necessary, as we are chiefly concerned with the British forces, to detail the composition of this third column which the Duke of York commanded.

It consisted of twelve battalions and ten

squadrons, with a further reserve of sixteen British squadrons under General Erskine, which cavalry lay somewhat south of Templeuve, but ready to follow up the advance when it should begin. It was made of two portions, about equal in numbers, British and foreign. The foreign half was composed of four squadrons of Austrian Hussars and seven battalions of infantry, two Hessian and five Austrian. The British half was composed of a Brigade of Guards counting four battalions, with portions of the 14th, 37th, and 53rd Foot, while the British cavalry accompanying it (apart from the squadrons under Erskine) were six squadrons drawn from the 7th, 15th, and 16th Light Dragoons. It is to the credit of the young commander[1] that this third column was the best organised, the most prompt, and, as the event proved, the most successful during the advance and the most tenacious in the subsequent defeat.

The fourth column, under Kinsky, about 11,000 strong, was also ready on that Friday,

[1] After so many allusions to his youth, I may as well give the date of his birth. Frederick, Duke of York, the second son of King George III. of England, was not yet thirty when he suffered at Tourcoing, having been born in 1765. He had the misfortune to die in 1827.

the 16th of May, concentrated at its point of departure, Froidmont, and ready to move at the same moment as all the others, shortly after midnight. But unlike the other three commanders upon his right, Kinsky was unfortunately handicapped by the position of the fifth column, that great body of 18,000 to 20,000 men, under the Arch-Duke Charles, which lay at St Amand, which was to advance next day parallel with Kinsky and upon his left, and which it was his duty to keep in touch with, and to link up with the Duke of York's upon the other side. He was handicapped, I say, by the situation of the fifth column, under the Arch-Duke Charles, the heavy strain already imposed upon which, and the accumulating difficulties it was about to encounter, largely determining the unfortunate issue of the battle.

Kinsky got news on that Friday from the Arch-Duke at St Amand that it was hardly possible for his great body of men to reach the appointed post of Pont-à-Marcq at the arranged hour of daybreak the next morning. I have already suggested that this delay cannot only have been due to the very long march which had been imposed upon the Arch-Duke's command when it had been hurriedly summoned up

from the south to St Amand, forty-eight hours before. It must also have been due to the fact that not all its units reached St Amand by the evening of Thursday the 15th. It seemed certain that there must have been stragglers or bad delays on the morning of the 16th, for it was not until long after nightfall—indeed not until ten o'clock in the evening—of Friday the 16th that the Arch-Duke was able to set out from St Amand and take the Pont-à-Marcq road. This unfortunate body, therefore, the fifth column, which had all the hardest work before it, which had but one road by which to march (although it was double any of the others in size), was compelled, after the terrible fatigue of the preceding days, to push forward sixteen miles through the night in a vain attempt to reach Pont-à-Marcq, not indeed by daybreak, for that was obviously impossible, but as soon after as haste and anxiety could command. Kinsky was tied to Froidmont and unable to move forward until that fifth column upon his left was at least approaching its goal. For he had Bonnaud's 20,000 Frenchmen at Sainghin right in front of him, and further, if he had moved, his left flank would have been exposed, and, what is more, he would have failed in his purpose,

which was to link up the Arch-Duke on one side with the Duke of York upon the other.

This first mishap, then, must be carefully noted as one prime lack of synchrony in the origins of the combined movement, and a first clear cause of the misfortune that was to attend the whole affair. The delay of the fifth column was the chief cause of the disaster.

Meanwhile, another failure to synchronise, and that a most grave one, was taking place miles away in the north with Clerfayt's command beyond the Lys.

It is self-evident that where one isolated and distant body is being asked to co-operate with comrades who are in touch with the commander-in-chief, and with each other, the exact observation of orders on the part of that isolated body is of supreme importance to the success of the combination. *They*, all lying in much the same region and able to receive and transmit orders with rapidity, may correct an error before it has developed evil consequences. But the isolated commander co-operating from a distance, and receiving orders from headquarters only after a long delay, is under no such advantage. Thus the tardiness of the fifth column was, as we have

seen, communicated to the fourth, and the third, second, and first, all in one line, could or should have easily appreciated the general situation along the Scheldt. But the sixth body, under Clerfayt, which formed the keystone of the whole plan, and without whose exact co-operation that plan must necessarily fail, enjoyed no such advantage, and, if it indulged in the luxuries of delay or misdirection, could not have its errors corrected in useful time. A despatch, to reach Clerfayt from headquarters and from the five columns that were advancing northward from the valley of the Scheldt, must make a circuit round eastward to the back of Courtrai, and it was a matter of nearly half a day to convey information from the Emperor or his neighbouring subordinates in the region of Tournai to this sixth corps which lay north of the Lys.

Now it so happened that Clerfayt, though a most able man, and one who had proved himself a prompt and active general, woefully miscalculated the time-table of his march and the difficulties before him.

He got his orders, as I have said, at ten o'clock on the Friday morning. Whether to give his men a meal, or for whatever other reason, he did not break up until between one and two. He then began

ploughing forward with his sixteen thousand men and more, in two huge columns, through the sandy country that forms the plain north of the River Lys. He ought to have known the difficulty of rapid advance over such a terrain, but he does not seem to have provided for it with any care, and when night fell, so far from finding himself in possession of Wervicq and master of the crossing of the river there, the heads of his columns had only reached the great highway between Menin and Ypres, nearly three miles short of his goal. Three miles may sound a short distance to the civilian reader, but if he will consider the efforts of a great body of men and vehicles, pushing forward through the late hours of an afternoon by wretched lanes full of loose sand, and finding the darkness upon them with that distance still to do, he would perceive the importance of the gap. If he further considers that it was only the heads of the columns that had reached the high road by dark, and that two great bodies of men were stretched out two miles and more behind, and if he will add to all this the fact that fighting would have to be done before Wervicq, three miles away, could be occupied, let alone the river crossed, he will discover that Clerfayt had missed his appointment not by three miles

only in space, but by the equivalent of half a day in time.

Even so he should have pushed on and have found himself at least in contact with the French posts before his advance was halted. He did not do so. He passed the night in bivouac with the heads of his columns no further south than the great high road.

So much for Clerfayt. The Republic would have cut off his head.

While Clerfayt was thus mishandling his distant and all-important department of the combined scheme, the corresponding advance from the valley of the Scheldt northward was proceeding in a manner which is best appreciated by taking the five columns seriatim and in three groups: the first group consisting of the first column (Bussche), the second group of the second and third columns (Otto and York), the third group of the fourth and fifth (Kinsky and the Arch-Duke).

I

THE FIRST COLUMN UNDER BUSSCHE

This column, as we have seen, consisted of only 4000 men, Hanoverians. Its function and general plan was to give the French the

impression that they were being attacked by considerable forces at the very extremity of their advanced wedge, and thus to "hold" them there while the great bulk of the allies were really encircling them to the south and cutting them off from Lille.

When we bear this object in view, we shall see that Bussche with his little force did not do so badly. His orders were to advance with two-thirds of his men againstMouscron, a little place about five miles in front of the village of St Leger where he was concentrated; the remaining third going up the high road towards Courtrai. This last decision, namely, to detach a third of his troops, has been severely criticised, especially by English authorities, but the criticism is hardly just if we consider what Bussche had been sent out to do. He was, of course, to take Mouscron if he could and hold it, and if that had been the main object of the orders given him, it would indeed have been folly to weaken his already weak body by the detaching of a whole third of it four miles away upon the high road to the eastward. But the capture of Mouscron was not the main object set before Bussche. The main object was to "hold" the large French forces in the Courtrai district and to give them the impression of a main attack

coming in that direction, and with *that* object in view it was very wise so to separate his force as to give Souham the idea that the French northern extremity was being attacked in several places at once.

With the early morning, then, of Saturday the 17th, Bussche sent rather less than 1500 men up the high road towards Courtrai, and, with rather more than 2500, marched boldly up against Mouscron, where, considering the immensely superior forces that the French could bring against him, it is not surprising that he was badly hammered. Indeed, but for the fact that the French were unprepared (as we saw in the section "The Preliminaries of the Battle"), he could not have done as much as he did, which was, at the first onslaught, to rush Mouscron and to hold it in the forenoon of that day. But the French, thoroughly alarmed by the event (which was precisely what the plan of the allies intended they should be), easily brought up overwhelming reinforcements, and Bussche's little force was driven out of the town. It was not only driven out of the town, it was pressed hard down the road as far as Dottignies within a mile or two of the place from which it had started; but there it rallied and stood, and for the rest of the day kept the

French engaged without further misfortune. A student of the whole action, careful to keep its proportions in mind and not to exaggerate a single instance, will not regard Bussche's gallant attempt and failure before Mouscron as any part of the general breakdown. On the contrary, the stand which his little force made against far superior numbers, and the active cannonade which he kept up upon this extreme edge of the French front, would have been one of the major conditions determining the success of the allies if their enormously larger forces in other parts of the field had all of them kept their time-table and done what was expected of them.

II

THE SECOND AND THIRD COLUMNS UNDER OTTO AND THE DUKE OF YORK

On turning to the second group (the second column under Otto and the third under York), we discover a record of continuous success throughout the whole of that day, Saturday the 17th of May, which deserved a better fate than befell them upon the morrow.

(A) The Second Column under Otto

The second column under Otto, consisting of twelve battalions and ten squadrons, certain of the latter being English horse, and the whole command numbering some 10,000 men, advanced with the early morning of that same Saturday the 17th simultaneously with Bussche from Bailleul to Leers. It drove the French outposts in, carried Leers, and advanced further to Wattrelos. It carried Wattrelos.

It continued its successful march another three miles, still pressing in and thrusting off to its right the French soldiers of Compere's command, until it came to what was then the little market-town of Tourcoing. It carried Tourcoing and held it. This uninterrupted series of successes had brought Otto's troops forward by some eight miles from their starting-point, and had filled the whole morning, and Otto stood during the afternoon in possession of this advanced point, right on the line between Courtrai and Lille, and having fully accomplished the object which his superiors had set him.

From the somewhat higher roll of land which his cavalry could reach, and from which they could observe the valley of the

Lys four miles beyond, they must have strained their eyes to catch some hint of Clerfayt's troops, upon whose presence across the river on their side they had so confidently calculated, and which, had Clerfayt kept to his time-table and crossed the Lys at dawn, would now have been in the close neighbourhood of Tourcoing and in junction with this successful second column.

But there was no sign of any such welcome sight. The dull rolling plain, with its occasional low crests falling towards the river, betrayed the presence of troops in more than one position to the north and west. But those troops were not moving: they were holding positions, or, if moving, were obviously doing so with the object of contesting the passage of the river. They were French troops, not Austrian, that thus showed distinctly in rare and insufficient numbers along the southern bank of the Lys, and indeed, as we know, Clerfayt, during the whole of that afternoon of the 17th, was painfully bringing up his delayed pontoons, and was, until it was far advanced, upon the wrong side of the river.

Otto maintained his position, hoped against hope that Clerfayt might yet force his way through before nightfall, and was

still master of Tourcoing and the surrounding fields when darkness came.

(B) The Third Column under York

Meanwhile York, with his 10,000 half British and half Austro-Hessian, had marched with similar success but against greater obstacles parallel with Otto, and to his left, and had successively taken every point in his advance until he also had reached the goal which had been set before him.

Details of that fine piece of work deserve full mention.

Delayed somewhat by a mist in the dark hours before dawn, York's command had marched north-westward up the road from Templeuve, where now runs the little tramway reaching the Belgian frontier.

The French troops in front of him, as much as those who had met Otto a mile or two off to the right, and Bussche still further off at Mouscron, were taken aback by the suddenness and the strength of the unexpected blow. They stood at Lannoy. York cannonaded that position, sent certain of the British Light Dragoons round to the left to turn it, and attacked it in front with the Brigade of Guards. The enemy did not stand, and the British forces poured

through Lannoy and held it just as Otto in those same hours was pouring into and holding Leers and Wattrelos. Beyond Lannoy, a matter of two miles or so, and still on that same road, was the small town, now swollen to a great industrial city, called Roubaix. The Duke of York left a couple of battalions of his allied troops (Hessians) to hold Lannoy, and with the rest of the column pursued his march.

Roubaix offered far more serious resistance than Lannoy had done. The element of surprise was, of course, no longer present. The French forces were concentrating. The peril they were in of being cut off was by this time thoroughly seized at their headquarters, and the roll of land immediately before Roubaix was entrenched and held by a sufficient force well gunned. A strong resistance was offered to the British advance, but once more the Brigade of Guards broke down that resistance and the place was taken with the bayonet.

York's next objective, and the goal to which his advance had been ordered, was Mouveaux. Mouveaux is a village standing upon a somewhat higher roll of land rather more than two miles from the centre of Roubaix, in continuation of the direction which York's advance had hitherto pursued.

From Mouveaux the eye could overlook the plain reaching to the Lys and to Wervicq, some seven odd miles away, a plain broken by one or two slight hummocks of which the least inconspicuous holds the village of Linselles. Mouveaux was the point to which Clerfayt was expected to advance from his side. It was on a level with Tourcoing, and lay, as Tourcoing did, precisely upon the line between Courtrai and Lille. To reach Mouveaux, therefore, and not to be content with the capture of Roubaix, was consistent with and necessary to the general plan of the allies. Moreover, as Otto with the second column had taken Tourcoing, it was necessary that the third column should proceed to Mouveaux, unless Otto's left or southern flank was to remain exposed and in peril. One may say, in general, that until Mouveaux was occupied the chance of joining hands with Clerfayt (supposing that General to have kept to his time-table and to be across the Lys and marching up to meet the columns from the Scheldt) was in peril. Therefore, until one has learnt what was happening to the fourth and the fifth columns, it is difficult to understand why the Duke of York, after the difficult capture of Roubaix, desired to make that point the utmost limit of his advance

and for the moment to proceed no further. Without anticipating the story of the fourth and fifth columns, it is enough to say that the Duke of York's desire not to advance beyond Roubaix was sufficiently excused by the aspect of the country to the west and south upon his left.

Roubaix overlooks from a slight elevation the valley of the Marque. Lest the word "valley" be misleading, let me hasten to add that that stream here flows at the bottom of a very slight and very broad depression. But, at any rate, from Roubaix one overlooks that depression for some miles; one sees five miles distant the fortifications of Lille, and the intervening country is open enough to betray the presence of troops. Indeed, once Roubaix was captured, the English commander could see across those fields, a couple of hours' march away, the tents of the great French camp at Sainghin under the walls of the fortress.

Now, along that river valley and across those fields there should have been apparent in those mid hours of the day, when the Guards had stormed Roubaix, the great host of the fourth and fifth columns coming up in support of the second and third.

If the time-table had been observed, the Arch-Duke and Kinsky, over 25,000 men,

should have been across the Marque before dawn, should have pushed back the French forces outside Lille, and should, long before noon, have been covering those fields between Roubaix and Lille with their advancing squadrons and battalions. There was no sign of them. If, or when, the French body near Lille were free to advance and attack the Duke of York's left flank, there was no one between to prevent their doing so. That great body of the third and fourth columns, more than half of all the men who were advancing from the Scheldt to meet Clerfayt, had failed to come up to time. That was why the Duke of York desired to push no further than Roubaix, and even to leave only an advance guard to hold that place while he withdrew the bulk of his command to Lannoy.

But his decision was overruled. The Emperor and his staff, who, following up the march of this third column, were now at Templeuve, thought it imperative that Mouveaux should be held. Only thus, in their judgment, could the junction with Clerfayt (who, though late, must surely be now near at hand) be accomplished. And certainly, unless Mouveaux were held, Otto could not hold his advanced position at

Tourcoing. The order was therefore sent to York to take Mouveaux. In the disastrous issue that order has naturally come in for sharp blame ; but it must be remembered that much of the plan was already successfully accomplished, that Clerfayt was thought to be across the Lys, and that if the French around Courtrai, and hitherward from Courtrai to Tourcoing, were to be cut off, it was imperative to effect the junction with Clerfayt without delay. Had Clerfayt been, as he should have been at that hour in the afternoon of Saturday the 17th, between the Lys and the line Mouveaux-Tourcoing, the order given by the Austrian staff to the Duke of York would not only have been approved by the military opinion of posterity, but any other order would have been thought a proof of indecision and bad judgment.

Upon receiving this order to take Mouveaux, York obeyed. The afternoon was now far advanced, very heavy work had been done, a forward march of nearly six miles had been undertaken, accompanied by continual fighting—latterly, outside Roubaix, of a heavy sort. But if Mouveaux was to be held before nightfall, an immediate attack must be made, and York ordered his men forward.

Mouveaux stands upon one of those very slight crests which barely diversify the flat country in which Roubaix and Tourcoing stand. The summit of that crest is but little more than fifty feet higher than the bottom of the low, broad depression between it and the centre of Roubaix, of which swollen town it is to-day a western suburb. Slight as is the elevation, it does, as I have said, command a view towards the Lys and Wervicq ; and the evenness and length of the very gentle slope upon the Roubaix side make it an excellent defensive position.

I have pointed out how the columns of attack as they advanced could not fail to find an increasing resistance. Roubaix had held out more strongly than Lannoy, Mouveaux was to hold out more strongly than Roubaix. The position was palisaded and entrenched. Redoubts had even been hastily thrown up by the French at either end of it, but the weight of the attacking column told. It was again the Guards who were given the task of carrying the trenches at the bayonet, and after a sharp struggle they were successful. The French, as they retired, set fire to the village (which stands upon the very summit of that roll of land), and were charged in their retirement by

Abercromby with the English Dragoons. They left three hundred upon the field, and three field-pieces as well. Despite the great superiority of numbers which York's columns still commanded over the enemy immediately before him, it was a brilliant feat, especially when one considers that it came at the very end of a day that was hot for the season, that had begun before one o'clock in the morning, and that had involved the carrying of three positions, each more stoutly defended than the last, within an advance of over seven miles.

Mouveaux thus carried, the head of York's column was on a line with the head of Otto's, which held Tourcoing just two miles away. The heads of either column now occupied the main road between Lille and Courtrai (which passes through Mouveaux and Tourcoing), and the heads of either column also held the slight crests from which the belated advance of Clerfayt from the Lys could be watched and awaited.

But though there was evidence of heavy fighting down in the river valley five miles to the north and west, and though it seemed probable from the sound of the firing that Clerfayt with the sixth body had crossed the Lys at Wervicq and was now

on the right side of it, upon the southern bank, there was no sign of his advancing columns in those empty fields towards Linselles and the river over which the setting sun glared.

Neither, as his troops prepared to bivouac for the night upon the slopes of Mouveaux, could York, looking southward, find any indication of the fourth and fifth columns under Kinsky and the Arch-Duke which should have come up to this same position at Mouveaux by noon seven hours before. The flat and marshy fields upon either bank of the Marque were anxiously scanned in vain as the twilight deepened. Down there, far off, the cannon had been heard all that afternoon round the French camp at Sainghin, but nothing had come through.

It was therefore under a sense of isolation and of confusion, with the knowledge that their left flank was open, that Clerfayt in front of them was not yet in reach, that the second and third columns, which had so thoroughly accomplished their task, established their posts under the early summer night to await the chances of the morning.

III

THE FOURTH AND FIFTH COLUMNS UNDER KINSKY AND THE ARCH-DUKE CHARLES

Now what had happened to the fourth and fifth columns under Kinsky and the Arch-Duke? I must describe their fortunes, show why they had failed to come up, and thus complete the picture of the general advance from the Scheldt, before I turn to conclude the explanation of the disaster by detailing the further adventures of Clerfayt after he had crossed the Lys.

(A) The Fourth Column under Kinsky

Kinsky with his 11,000 men had been delayed, as we have seen, at Froidmont by the message which the Arch-Duke had sent him from St Amand, to the effect that the fifth column could not hope to be at Pont-à-Marcq before dawn upon the 17th.

At the moment, therefore, when in the small hours of Saturday the 17th Otto and the Duke of York started out simultaneously from Bailleul and Templeuve, Kinsky was still pinned to Froidmont. But he knew that the Arch-Duke had started with his great

column some time after dark in the Friday night from St Amand, and when he estimated that they had proceeded far enough along the road to Pont-à-Marcq to be up level with him upon his left, Kinsky set his men in march and made for the Bridge of Bouvines, which was the crossing of the Marque immediately in front of him.

The Bridge of Bouvines lay right in front of the great French camp. It was strongly held, and the hither side of the river, as Kinsky approached it, was found to be entrenched. His men drove the French from those entrenchments, they retired over the bridge, and as they retired they broke it down. Upon the far side of the river in front of their camp the French further established a battery of heavy guns upon that slight slope which is now crowned by the Fort of Sainghin, and Kinsky could not force the passage until the fifth column, or at any rate the head of it, should begin to appear upon his left.

It will be seen upon the frontispiece map that when the Arch-Duke's men reached Pont-à-Marcq and crossed the river there, they would take the French camp and the main French forces there in reserve, weaken the power of the French

resistance at the Bridge of Bouvines, afford Kinsky the opportunity of crossing at that point, and that, immediately after that crossing, Kinsky and the Arch-Duke, having joined hands, would be in sufficient strength to push back the French from Sainghin and to march up north together towards Mouveaux. The appearance of their combined force at Mouveaux by noon would fulfil the time-table, and at mid-day of Saturday, if the time-table were thus fulfilled, the whole combined force of the second, third, fourth, and fifth columns would have been astraddle of the Lille-Courtrai Road, would have cut off Souham's corps from Lille, and could await Clerfayt if he had not yet arrived. When, therefore, the Arch-Duke and the fifth column should have crossed the Marque at Pont-à-Marcq, the fortunes of the fourth column would have blended with it, and the story of the two would have been one. We may therefore leave Kinsky still waiting anxiously in front of the broken bridge at Bouvines for news of the Arch-Duke, and conclude the picture of the whole advance from the Scheldt by describing what had happened and was happening to that Commander and his great force of 17,000 to 18,000 men.

(B) The Fifth Column under the Arch-Duke Charles

When the Arch-Duke Charles had let Kinsky know upon the day before, the Friday, that he could not be at the appointed post of Pont-à-Marcq by the next daybreak, he had implied that somewhere in the early morning of that Saturday, at least, he would be there. Exactly how early neither he nor Kinsky could tell. His troops had sixteen full miles to march; they had but one road by which to advance, and they were fatigued with the enormous exertion of that hurried march northward to St Amand, which has already been set down.

Such were the delays at St Amand in preparing that advance, that the night was far gone before the fifth column took the road to Pont-à-Marcq, and the effort that was to be demanded of it was more than should have been justly demanded of any troops. Indeed, the idea that a body of this great size, tied to one road, could suffer the severe effort of the rush from the south to St Amand, followed by a night-march, that march to be followed by heavy fighting during the ensuing morning and a further advance of eight or nine miles during the forenoon, was one of the weakest points in

the plan of the allies. No such weakness would have been apparent if the main body of the Austrians under the Arch-Duke had been called up on the 12th instead of the 14th, and had been given two more days in which to cover the great distance. But, as it was, the delay of the Emperor and his staff in calling up that main body had gravely weakened its effective power.

The league-long column thrust up the road through the darkness hour upon hour, with its confusion of vehicles and that difficulty in marshalling all units which is the necessary handicap of an advance in the darkness. Long before their task was so much as half accomplished, it was apparent not only that Pont-à-Marcq would not be reached at dawn, but that the mass of the infantry would not be at that river-crossing until the morning was far spent.

When day broke, though cavalry had been set forward at greater speed, the heads of the infantry column were but under the Hill of Beuvry. It was long after six before the force had passed through Orchies, and though Kinsky learnt, in the neighbourhood of eight o'clock, that the cavalry of the fifth column were up on a level with him and had reached the river, the main force of the fifth column was not available for

crossing Pont-à-Marcq until noon, and past noon.

Kinsky, thus tied to the broken Bridge of Bouvines until Pont-à-Marcq should be forced, saw mid-day come and pass, and still his force and that of the Arch-Duke upon his left were upon the wrong side of the stream.

Yet another hour went by. His fourth column and the fifth should already have been nine miles up north, by Mouveaux, and they were not yet even across the Marque !

It was not until two o'clock that the passage of the river at Pont-à-Marcq was forced by the Arch-Duke Charles, and that, as the consequence of that passage of the stream, the French were taken in reverse in their camp at Sainghin and were compelled to fall back northward, leaving the passage at Bouvines free. Kinsky repaired the bridge, and was free to bring his 11,000 over, and the two extreme columns, the fourth and the fifth, would then have joined forces in the mid-afternoon of the Saturday, having accomplished their object of forcing the Marque and uniting for the common advance northward in support of Otto and the Duke of York.

Now, had the Arch-Duke Charles' men been machines, this section of the general

plan would yet have failed by half a day to keep its time-table : and by more than half a day : by all the useful part of a working day. By the scheme of time upon which the plan was based, the fifth column should have been across the Marque at dawn ; by six, or at latest by seven, o'clock the French should have been compelled to fall back from Sainghin, and the combined fourth and fifth columns should have been upon their northward march for Mouveaux. It was not seven o'clock, it was *between three and four* o'clock by the time the Arch-Duke was well across the Marque and the French retired ; but still, if the men of this fifth column had been machines, Kinsky was now free to effect his junction across the Bridge of Bouvines, and the combined force would have reached the neighbourhood of Mouveaux and Tourcoing by nightfall, or shortly after dark.

But the men of the fifth column were not machines, and at that hour of the mid-afternoon of Saturday they had come to the limits of physical endurance. It was impossible to ask further efforts of them, or, if those efforts were demanded, to hope for success. In the Arch-Duke's column by far the greater part of the 17,000 or 18,000 men had been awake and working for thirty-

six hours. All had been on foot for at least twenty-four ; they had been actually marching for seventeen, and had been fighting hard at the end of the effort and after sixteen miles of road. There could be no question of further movement that day: they bivouacked just north of the river, near where the French had been before their retirement, and Kinsky, seeing no combined movement could be made that day, kept his men also bivouacked near the Bridge of Bouvines.[1]

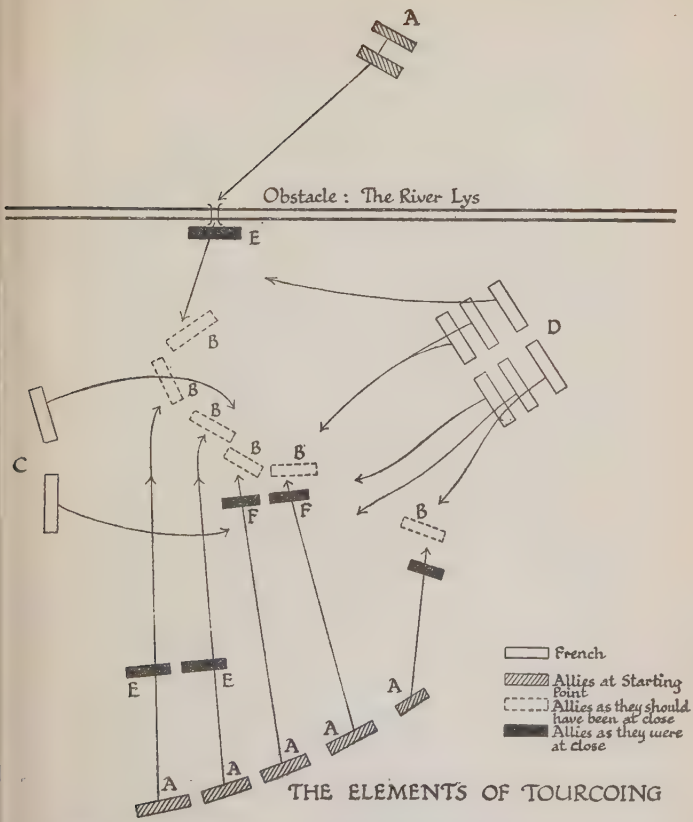
Thus it was that when night fell upon that Saturday the left wing of the advance from the Scheldt had failed. And that is why those watching from the head of the successful third column at Mouveaux and Roubaix, under the sunset of that evening, saw no reinforcement coming up the valley of the Marque, caught no sign of their thirty thousand comrades advancing from the south, and despaired of the morrow.

[1] The reader not indifferent to comedy will hear with pleasure that, among various accounts of Kinsky's communication with the Arch-Duke Charles at this juncture, one describes that Royalty as inaccessible after the fatigue of the day. His colleague is represented as asking in vain for an interview, and receiving from a servant the reply "that his Imperial Highness must not be disturbed, as he was occupied in having a fit."

SUMMARY OF SITUATION ON THE SOUTH BY THE EVENING OF SATURDAY, MAY 17TH.

If we take stock of the whole situation, so far as the advance of the five columns from the Scheldt was concerned, when darkness fell upon that Saturday we can appreciate the peril in which the second and third column under Otto and York lay.

The position which the plan had assigned to the four columns, second, third, fourth, and fifth, by noon of that Saturday (let alone by nightfall), is that marked upon the map by the middle four of the six oblongs in dotted lines marked B. Of these, the two positions on the *right* were filled, for the second and third columns had amply accomplished their mission. But the two on the *left*, so far from being filled, were missed by miles of space and hours of time. At midday, or a little after, when Kinsky and the Arch-Duke should have been occupying the second and third dotted oblong respectively, neither of them was as yet even across the Marque. Both were far away back at E, E: and these hopeless positions, E, E, right away behind the line of positions across the Courtrai-Lille road which the plan expected



THE ELEMENTS OF TOURCOING

The Allies starting from A.A... march to converge at B.B... and thus cut off the large French force at D from its base etc at C. Portions are retarded at E.E.E. and the advanced portions at F.F... are therefore isolated; the French have time to advance on these and destroy them.

them to occupy by Saturday noon, Kinsky and the Arch-Duke pacifically maintained up to and including the night between Saturday and Sunday!

It is evident, therefore, that instead of all four columns of nearly *sixty* thousand men barring the road between Souham and Lille and effecting the isolation of the French "wedge" round Courtrai, a bare, unsupported *twenty* thousand found themselves that night alone: holding Roubaix, Tourcoing, Lannoy, Mouveaux, and thrust forward isolated in the midst of overwhelmingly superior and rapidly gathering numbers.

In such an isolation nothing could save Otto and York but the abandonment during the night of their advanced positions and a retreat upon the points near the Scheldt from which they had started twenty hours before.

The French forces round Lille were upon one side of them to the south and west, in number perhaps 20,000. On the other side of them, towards Courtrai, was the mass of Souham's force which they had hoped to cut off, nearly 40,000 strong. Between these two great bodies of men, the 20,000 of Otto and York were in peril of destruction if the French awoke to the

position before the retirement of the second and third columns was decided on.

It is here worthy of remark that the only real cause of peril was the absence of Kinsky and the Arch-Duke.

Certain historians have committed the strange error of blaming Bussche for what followed. Bussche, it will be remembered, had been driven out of Mouscron early in the day, and was holding on stubbornly enough, keeping up an engagement principally by cannonade with the French upon the line of Dottignies. It is obvious that from such a position he could be of no use to the isolated Otto and York five miles away. But on the other hand, he was not expected to be of any use. What could his 4000 have done to shield the 20,000 of Otto and York from those 40,000 French under Souham's command? His business was to keep as many of the French as possible occupied away on the far north-east of the field, and that object he was fulfilling.

Finally, it may be asked why, in a posture so patently perilous, Otto and York clung to their advanced positions throughout the night? The answer is simple enough. If, even during the night, the fourth and fifth columns should appear, the battle was half won. If Clerfayt, of whom they had no

news, but whom they rightly judged to be by this time across the Lys, were to arrive before the French began to close in, the battle would be not half won, but all won. Between 55,000 and 60,000 men would then be lying united across the line which joined the 40,000 of the enemy to the north with the 20,000 to the south. If such a junction were effected even at the eleventh hour, so long as it took place before the 20,000 French outside Lille and the 40,000 to the north moved upon them, the allies would have won a decisive action, and the surrender of all Souham's command would have been the matter of a few hours. For a force cut in two is a force destroyed.

But the night passed without Clerfayt's appearing, and before closing the story of that Saturday I must briefly tell why, though he had crossed the Lys in the afternoon, he failed to advance southward through the intervening five or six miles to Mouveaux.

CLERFAYT'S COLUMN.

Clerfayt had, in that extraordinary slow march of his, advanced by the Friday night, as I have said, no further than the great high road between Menin and Ypres. I

further pointed out that though only three miles separated that point from Wervicq, yet those three miles meant, under the military circumstances of the moment, a loss of time equivalent to at least half a day.

We therefore left Clerfayt at Saturday's dawn, as we left the Arch-Duke at the same time, far short of the starting-point which had been assigned to him.

Whereas the Arch-Duke, miles away over there to the south, had at least pushed on to the best of his ability through the night towards Pont-à-Marcq, Clerfayt did *not* push on by night to Wervicq as he should have done. He bivouacked with the heads of his columns no further than the Ypres road.

Nor did he even break up and proceed over the remaining three miles during the very earliest hours. For one reason or another (the point has never been cleared up) the morning was fairly well advanced when he set forth—possibly because his units had got out of touch and straggling in the sandy country, or blocked by vehicles stuck fast. Whatever the cause may have been, he did not exchange shots with the French outposts at Wervicq until well after noon upon that Saturday the 17th of May.

When at last he had forced his way into

the town (the great bulk of which lies north of the river), he found the bridge so well defended that he could not cross it, or, at any rate, that the carrying of it—the chances of its being broken after the French should have retired and the business of bringing his great force across, with the narrow streets of the town to negotiate and the one narrow bridge, even if intact to use—would put him upon the further bank at a hopelessly late hour. Therefore did he call for his pontoons in order to solve the difficulty by bridging the river somewhat lower down. The Lys is here but a narrow stream, and it would be easy, with the pontoons at his disposal, to pass his troops over rapidly upon a broader front, making, if necessary, two wide bridges. I say "with the pontoons at his disposal." But by the time Clerfayt had taken this decision and had sent for the pontoons, he found that they were not there!

His section of pontoons had not kept abreast with the rest of the army, and their delay had not been notified to him. It was not until quite late in the day that they arrived; it was not until evening that the laying of the pontoons began,[1] nor till mid-

[1] At a point somewhat below Wervicq: much where the private ferry now plies.

night that he was passing the first of his troops over.

He did not get nor attempt to get the mass of his sixteen or seventeen thousand across in the darkness. He bivouacked the remainder upon the wrong side of the river and waited for the morrow.

So that Saturday ended, with Otto and York isolated at the central meeting-place round Tourcoing-Mouveaux, which they alone had reached; with the Arch-Duke Charles and Kinsky bivouacked miles away to the south on either side of the Bridge of Bouvines; and with Clerfayt still, as to the bulk of his force, on the wrong side of the Lys.

It was no wonder that the next day, Sunday, was to see the beginning of disaster.

SUNDAY, MAY THE 18TH, 1794.

I have said that, considering the isolated position in which York and Otto found themselves, with no more than perhaps 18,000 in the six positions of Leers, Wattrelos, and Tourcoing, Lannoy, Roubaix, and Mouveaux, the French had only to wake up to the situation, and Otto and York would be overwhelmed.

The French did wake up. How thoroughly taken by surprise they had been by the prompt and exact advance of Otto and York the day before, the reader has already been told. Throughout Saturday they remained in some confusion as to the intention of the enemy ; and indeed it was not easy to grasp a movement which was at once of such great size, and whose very miscarriage rendered it the more baffling of comprehension. But by the evening of the day, Souham, calling a council of his generals at Menin, came to a decision as rapid as it was wise. Reynier, Moreau, and Macdonald, the generals of divisions that were under his orders, all took part in the brief discussion and the united resolve to which it led. "It was," in the words of a contemporary, "one of those rare occasions in which the decision of several men in council has proved as effective as the decision of a single will."

Of the troops which were, it will be remembered, dispersed to the north of the Lys, only one brigade was left upon the wrong side of the river to keep an eye on Clerfayt ; all the rest were recalled across the stream and sent forward to take up positions north of Otto's and Kinsky's columns. Meanwhile the bulk of the French troops lying between Courtrai and

Tourcoing were disposed in such fashion as to attack from the north and east, south and westward. Some 40,000 men all told were ready to close in with the first light from both sides upon the two isolated bodies of the allies. To complete their discomfiture, word was sent to Bonnaud and Osten, the generals of divisions who commanded the 20,000 about Lille, ordering them to march north and east, and to attack simultaneously with their comrades upon that third exposed side where York would receive the shock. In other words, the 18,000 or so distributed on the six points under Otto and York occupied an oblong the two long sides of which and the top were about to be attacked by close upon 60,000 men. The hour from which this general combined advance inwards upon the doomed commands of the allies was to begin was given identically to all the French generals. They were to break up at three in the morning. With such an early start, the sun would not have been long risen before the pressure upon Otto and York would begin.

When the sun rose, the head of Otto's column upon the little height of Tourcoing saw to the north, to the north-east, and to the east, distant moving bodies, which were

the columns of the French attack advancing from those quarters. As they came nearer, their numbers could be distinguished. A brigade was approaching them from the north and the Lys valley, descending the slopes of the hillock called Mont Halhuin. It was Macdonald's. Another was on the march from Mouscron and the east. It was Compere's. The General who was commanding for Otto in Tourcoing itself was Montfrault. He perceived the extremity of the danger and sent over to York for reinforcement. York spared him two Austrian battalions, but with reluctance, for he knew that the attack must soon develop upon his side also. In spite of the peril, in the vain hope that Clerfayt might yet appear, Mouveaux and Tourcoing were still held, and upon the latter position, between five and six o'clock in the morning, fell the first shots of the French advance. The resistance at Tourcoing could not last long against such odds, and Montfrault, after a gallant attempt to hold the town, yielded to a violent artillery attack and prepared to retreat. Slowly gathering his command into a great square, he began to move south-eastward along the road to Wattrelos. It was half-past eight when that beginning of defeat was acknowledged.

Meanwhile York, on his side, had begun to feel the pressure. Mouveaux was attacked from the north somewhat before seven o'clock in the morning, and, simultaneously with that attack, a portion of Bonnaud's troops which had come up from the neighbourhood of Lille, was driving in York's outposts to the west of Roubaix.

How, it may be asked, did the French, in order thus to advance from Lille, negotiate the passage of that little River Marque, which obstacle had proved so formidable a feature in the miscarriage of the great allied plan the day before ? The answer is, unfortunately, easily forthcoming. York had left the bridges over the Marque unguarded. Why, we do not know. Whether from sheer inadvertence, or because he hoped that Kinsky had detached men for the purpose, for one reason or another he had left those passages free, and, by the bridge of Hempempont against Lannoy, by that of Breuck against Roubaix, Bonnaud's and Osten's men poured over.

As at Tourcoing, so at Mouveaux, a desperate attempt was made to hold the position. Indeed it was clung to far too late, but the straits to which Mouveaux was reduced at least afforded an opportunity for something of which the British service should

not be unmindful. Immediately between Roubaix and the River Marque, Fox, with the English battalions of the line, was desperately trying to hold the flank and to withstand the pressure of the French, who were coming across the river more than twice his superiors in number. He was supported by a couple of Austrian battalions, and the two services dispute as to which half of this defending force was first broken. But the dispute is idle. No troops could have stood the pressure, and at any rate the defence broke down—with this result: that the British troops holding Mouveaux, Abercrombie's Dragoons, and the Brigade of Guards, were cut off from their comrades in Roubaix. Meanwhile, Tourcoing having been carried and the Austrians driven out from thence, the eastern and western forces of the French had come into touch in the depression between Mouveaux and Roubaix, and it seemed as though the surrender or destruction of that force was imminent. Abercrombie saved it. A narrow gap appeared between certain forces of the French, eastward of the position at Mouveaux, and leaving a way open round to Roubaix. He took advantage of it and won through: the Guards keeping a perfect order, the rear defended by the mobility and daring of the

Dragoons. The village of Roubaix, in those days, consisted in the main of one long straight street, though what is now the great town had already then so far increased in size as to have suburbs upon the north and south. The skirmishers of the French were in these suburbs. (Fox's flank command had long ago retired, keeping its order, however, and making across country as best it could for Lannoy.) It was about half-past nine when Abercrombie's force, which had been saved by so astonishing a mixture of chance, skill, coolness, and daring, filed into the long street of Roubaix. The Guards and the guns went through the passage in perfect formation in spite of the shots dropping from the suburbs, which were already beginning to harass the cavalry behind them. Immediately to their rear was the Austrian horse, while, last of all, defending the retreat, the English Dragoons were just entering the village. In the centre of this long street a market-place opened out. The Austrian cavalry, arrived at it, took advantage of the room afforded them; they doubled and quadrupled their files until they formed a fairly compact body, almost filling the square. It was precisely at this moment that the French advance upon the eastern side of the village brought a gun to bear

down the long straight street and road, which led from the market square to Wattrelos. The moment it opened fire, the Austrians, after a vain attempt to find cover, pressed into the side streets down the market-place, fell into confusion. There is no question here of praise or blame: a great body of horsemen, huddled in a narrow space, suddenly pounded by artillery, necessarily became in a moment a mass of hopeless confusion. The body galloped in panic out of the village, swerved round the sharp corner into the narrower road (where the French had closed in so nearly that there was some bayonet work), and then came full tilt against the British guns, which lay blocking the way because the drivers had dismounted or cut the traces and fled. In the midst of this intolerable confusion a second gun was brought to bear by the French, and the whole mob of ridden and riderless horses, some dragging limbers, some pack-horses charged, many more the dispersed and maddened fragments of the cavalry, broke into the Guards, who had still kept their formation and were leading what had been but a few moments before an orderly retreat.

It is at this point, I think, that the merit of this famous brigade and its right to regard

the disaster not with humiliation but with pride, is best established. For that upon which soldiers chiefly look is the power of a regiment to reform. The Guards, thus broken up under conditions which made formation for the moment impossible, and would have excused the destruction of any other force, cleared themselves of the welter, recovered their formation, held the road, permitted the British cavalry to collect itself and once more form a rear-guard, and the retreat upon Lannoy was resumed by this fragment of York's command in good order: in good order, although it was subjected to heavy and increasing fire upon either side.

It was a great feat of arms.

As for the Duke of York, he was not present with his men. He had ridden off with a small escort of cavalry to see whether it might not be possible to obtain some reinforcement from Otto, but the French were everywhere in those fields. He found himself with a squadron, with a handful, and at last alone, until, a conspicuous figure with the Star of the Garter still pinned to his coat, he was chivied hither and thither across country, followed and flanked by the sniping shots of the French skirmishers in thicket and hedge; after that

brief but exceedingly troubled ride, Providence discovered him a brook and a bridge still held by some of Otto's Hessians. He crossed it, and was in safety.

His retreating men—those of them that remained, and notably the remnant of the Dragoons and the Guards—were still in order as they approached Lannoy. They believed, or hoped, that that village was still in possession of the Hessians whom York had left there. But the French attack had been ubiquitous that morning. It had struck simultaneously upon all the flanks. At Roubaix as at Mouveaux, at Lannoy as at Roubaix, and the Guards and the Dragoons within musket shot of Lannoy discovered it, in the most convincing fashion, to be in the hands of the enemy. After that check order and formation were lost, and the remaining fragment of the Austrian and British who had marched out from Templeuve the day before 10,000 strong, hurried, dispersed over the open field, crossed what is now the Belgian border, and made their way back to camp.

Thus was destroyed the third column, which, of all portions of the allied army, had fought hardest, had most faithfully executed its orders, had longest preserved discipline during a terrible retreat and against over-

whelming numbers : it was to that discipline that the Guards in particular owed the saving from the wreck of so considerable a portion of their body. Of their whole brigade just under 200 were lost, killed, wounded or taken prisoners. The total loss of the British was not quite five times this—just under 1000,—but of their guns, twenty-eight in number, nineteen were left in the hands of the enemy.

There is no need to recount in detail the fate of Otto's column. As it had advanced parallel in direction and success to the Duke of York's, it suffered a similar and parallel misfortune. As the English had found Lannoy occupied upon their line of retreat, so Otto's column had found Wattrelos. As the English column had broken at Lannoy, so the Austrian at Leers. And the second column came drifting back dispersed to camp, precisely as the third had done. When the fragments were mustered and the defeat acknowledged, it was about three o'clock in the afternoon.

For the rest of the allied army there is no tale to tell, save with regard to Clerfayt's command ; the fourth and the fifth columns, miles away behind the scene of the disaster, did not come into action. Long before they could have broken up after the breakdown

through exhaustion of the day before, the French were over the Marque and between them and York. When a move was made at noon, it was not to relieve the second and third columns, for that was impossible, though, perhaps, if they had marched earlier, the pressure they would have brought to bear upon Bonnaud's men might have done something to lessen the disaster. It is doubtful, for the Marque stood in between and the French did not leave it unguarded.

Bussche, true to his conduct of the day before, held his positions all day and maintained his cannonade with the enemy. It is true that there was no severe pressure upon him, but still he held his own even when the rout upon his left might have tempted him to withdraw his little force.

As for Clerfayt, he had not all his men across the Lys until that very hour of seven in the morning when York at Mouveaux was beginning to suffer the intolerable pressure of the French, and Otto's men at Tourcoing were in a similar plight.

By the time he had got all his men over, he found Vandamme holding positions, hastily prepared but sufficiently well chosen, and blocking his way to the south. With a defensive thus organised, though only half as strong as the attack, Vandamme was

capable of a prolonged resistance; and while it was in progress, reinforcements, summoned from the northern parts of the French line beyond Lille, had had time to appear towards the west. He must have heard from eight o'clock till noon the fire of his retreating comrades falling back in their disastrous retreat, and, rightly judging that he would have after mid-day the whole French army to face, he withdrew to the river, and had the luck to cross it the next day without loss: a thing that the French now free from the enemy to the south should never have permitted.

So ended the Battle of Tourcoing, an action which, for the interest of its scheme, for the weight of its results, and, above all, for the fine display of courage and endurance which British troops showed under conditions that should normally have meant annihilation, deserves a much wider fame in this country than it has obtained.

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